

SYNECDOCHE: VISIONS OF MIDWESTERN SOLITUDE

By

Cody Alan McLouth

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Art,
and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts.

Chairperson Judith McCrea

Norman Akers

Sherry Leedy

April 7, 2011

Date Defended

The Thesis Committee for Cody Alan McLouth certifies
that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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ABSTRACT

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Synecdoche: Visions of Midwestern Solitude is an MFA Thesis Exhibition comprised of small-scale paintings of rural scenes that examine the way memory and perception is used in experiencing the landscape. By incorporating a method of nocturnal observation, the artist introduces an element of uncertainty to the viewer—a veiling of context and awareness. Seemingly recognizable locations become abstractions of personal experience, transforming them into vaguely familiar gestures of life in the Midwest.

I often remember waking as a child to the sound of my mother and father preparing his ritual departure to work in the frigid dark of early morning, and the feeling of being both anxious and proud in knowing what he did. My father worked in an aggregate quarry where I had seen colossal equipment pulverize boulders into smithereens. I could imagine that the day ahead would be filled with a sense of power, solitude, danger, and the strange beauty of destruction. Now years later, I have again found inspiration in the mystery of darkness.

The night paintings in this exhibition, *Synecdoche: Visions of Midwestern Solitude*, represent the few short hours when tension and imagination begin to rebuild in anticipation of the next day to come. I find something deeply stirring and comforting within the solitude of a dimly lit street corner with small outcroppings of structures awaiting the return of their proprietors. As I search, buildings become violent portraits of brick and steel, and playgrounds turn into fragile private islands under the enveloping blackness of the sky. Painting to me is an expression of these tangible, memorable experiences.

Through the course of developing this body of work, my process has changed to anticipate and implement a new aesthetic applied to the question of what is real. In the process of searching for meaningful visual elements, I found that a strict representational approach did not create the unique portrait of the night that I wanted. Rather, the process itself needed to embrace a duality by balancing both visual and emotional experience so that each work would present its own discrete reality. I began with a desire to create a series of paintings that would derive form from imagination and memory, coupled with visual realities of the rural Midwest. By working both on location and in the studio, I employed observation of commonplace scenes witnessed at different times, ultimately forcing myself to commit subjects to memory. The effect was a more personal vision of the landscape... a blurring of how a place is perceived as vaguely familiar,

rather than immediately identifiable. Memory and invention then became significant devices in translating mundane scenes into a haunting and eerie reality.

In this series of paintings, I use a consistent small-scale format and pedestrian vantage point as pictorial devices to create an exhibition where the viewer peeks at small vignettes like a passerby who has paused for a moment to contemplate the night. From this perspective, the subject is depicted in a straight forward manner while retaining all of the eccentricities and dynamic forces that appeared to emanate from dark surroundings.

The night provides a veil that inhibits awareness of context; form is obscured into atmosphere, and a dynamic of uncertainty takes over. By using perception and memory, darkness becomes more intriguing and mysterious than the certainty of light, and what is exposed lends itself as a familiar yet transposed Mid-western portrait of solitude.

The following are selected documented images from the exhibition .



Laundromat, Oil on Panel, 14" x 14", 2010



Pair of Stalls, Oil on Panel, 14" x 14", 2011



The Odd Couple, Oil on Panel, 14" x 14", 2010



Stopping Point, Oil on Panel, 14" x 14", 2010



Red Door, Oil on Panel, 14" x 14", 2011



Broken Staircase, Oil on Panel, 14" x 14", 2010



Rhapsody in Blue, Oil on Panel, 14" x 14", 2011



Vacancy, Oil on Panel, 14" x 14", 2011